

TESTIMONY
Of the
AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS
On
MEDIA VIOLENCE
Before the
U.S. SENATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE
Presented by
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Good morning Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today about the effect of media violence on the health of children. My name is Dr. Donald Cook, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics. I am also a clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine, Denver and practice at the Monfort Children's Clinic in Greeley, Colorado. It is my pleasure to testify on behalf of 55,000 primary care pediatricians, pediatric medical subspecialists and pediatric surgical specialists dedicated to the health, safety and well-being of infants, children, adolescents and young adults.

For several decades, pediatricians have been increasingly concerned about media violence and its effects on the physical and mental health of children and adolescents. America's young people are being exposed to increasing amounts of media violence through television, movies, video games, and popular music. Video game violence, children's cartoons, and music lyrics have become increasingly graphic. Action films depict anatomically precise murder, rapes and assaults and video games detail bodies being blown apart, splattering blood and body parts on walls and floor. One of this year's best-selling music CDs contains a song in which the protagonist lovingly puts his baby to bed and engages in a fight with the child's mother, which ends in him slitting her throat, her screams of fear subsiding in the gurgle of blood.

On Monday, the Federal Trade Commission issued a report on the marketing of violence to children by the entertainment industry. As a pediatrician, I would like to present research on media violence and its effects on children and adolescents, examine the nature of child development, and show why entertainment violence can affect the health of some children.

RESEARCH

Since the 1950s, more than 3,500 research studies in the United States and around the world using many investigative methods have examined whether there is an association between exposure to media violence and subsequent violent behavior. All but 18 have shown a positive correlation between media exposure and violent behavior. Some findings:

- Epidemiologists studying a broad array of factors associated with violence, including poverty, racial discrimination, substance abuse, inadequate schools, joblessness and family

dissolution, found that exposure to violent media was a factor in half of the 10,000 homicides committed in the United States the previous year.

- Numerous studies indicate that a preference for heavy metal music may be a significant marker for alienation, substance abuse, psychiatric disorders, suicide risk, sex-role stereotyping, or risk-taking behaviors during adolescence.
- Research to date indicates that interactive media have an even more potent and lasting effect on violent behavior than passive media forms like television and movies. Several studies have shown that after playing violent video games, children and adolescents become desensitized to violence, have increased levels of aggressive thoughts and behavior, and act hostile toward others.
- Studies designed to test the theory that experiencing media violence leads to a catharsis, a reduction in actual aggression due to the vicarious release of hostility, actually found increased overt aggression because of lowered inhibitions after experiencing media violence.
- Meta-analysis, a process by which the results from many different research studies are analyzed as a whole, shows that the strength of the correlation between exposure to media violence and aggressive behavior is larger than that of condom non-use and sexually transmitted HIV, lead exposure and lower I.Q., passive tobacco smoke and lung cancer or calcium intake and bone mass, relationships which pediatricians accept as fact and on which we routinely base preventive medicine.

Children learn the ways of the world by observing and imitating—they cannot help but be influenced by media. Exposure to media violence, particularly violence perpetrated by dramatic heroes or, in the case of video games, the children themselves, results in an increased acceptance of violence as an appropriate means of conflict resolution. Media exaggerate the prevalence of violence in the world and offer strong motivation to protect oneself by carrying a weapon and being more aggressive. Perhaps the most insidious and potent effect of media violence is that it desensitizes viewers to “real life” violence and to the harm caused its victims. The more realistic, comic, or enjoyable the media violence, the greater the desensitization – video games that reward killing with points and higher levels of play are using better graphics capabilities to increase the gore, showing spraying blood and mangled body parts, or to personalize games with digital images such as recognizable faces on victims.

The etiology of violence is complex and multi-factorial. Entertainment violence is not the sole factor contributing to youth aggression, anti-social attitudes and violence. Family breakdown, peer influences, the availability of weapons, and numerous other factors may all play a part. But entertainment violence does contribute. The media are an area of clear risk that we, as a compassionate society, can address. Overwhelming scientific evidence has demonstrated that when young people are exposed to media violence, they learn aggressive attitudes and behaviors, develop fear of being victimized by a “mean world”, and become desensitized to violence. We need to recognize these effects and take this knowledge into consideration when we choose the media our children will use.

CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Research in a variety of circumstances and settings has shown that the strongest single correlate with violent behavior in young people is previous exposure to violence. Before age 8, children cannot discriminate between real life and fantasy. On-screen violence is as real to them as violence that they witness at home or in their community. From childhood’s magical thinking and impulsive behavior, adolescents must develop abstract thought and social controls to prepare them to deal with adult realities. If this development process occurs in a violent environment, it can become distorted. Media, with which children spend more time than with parents or teachers, have great potential for shaping the hearts, minds, and behaviors of America’s young people – and we need to take this potential very seriously.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Today, 99 percent of American homes have a television and 87 percent a VCR, 54 percent of children have a television and video games in their bedrooms, and watching videos is America’s favorite leisure activity. The average American child consumes media for 6 hours and 43 minutes each day, spending twice as much time each year with media as they do in school. Video games generate \$10 billion in earnings a year, more than the motion picture industry. Children average 90 minutes of video gaming per day and fantasy violence games are the most popular among children from the fourth grade on. Given what we know through research, why is violence marketed to children? To quote Dr. David Walsh, author of *Selling out America’s*

Children, “Violent entertainment is aimed at children because it is profitable. Questions of right or wrong, beneficial or harmful, are not considered. The only question is ‘Will it sell?’”

Entertainment media are a major industry in the United States and our number one export to the rest of the world. The entertainment industry is not only economically important, but it carries powerful messages, messages of who we are, how we live, and what we dream. It represents the spirit and culture of America - to ourselves, to the world, and to history. It is a powerful tool, a tool that we should not use casually. As medical professionals, pediatricians want parents and the entertainment industry to understand that films, video games, music, television programs and the Internet can have powerful effects on child health. They can be used to teach wonderful, enlightening and entertaining lessons to children but also can show graphically violent, cruel, and terrifying images that can lead to aggressive behavior in some children and nightmares, fearfulness or other emotional disturbances in others.

Free speech and open discussion of society’s concerns protect our liberty. We do not want censorship, which is both unconstitutional and ultimately unsuccessful in a free society. However, as U.S. House of Representatives Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) asserted, “Free expression does not necessarily have to lead to moral chaos. Let us join together in finding ways to help parents raise their children to be good, productive citizens.” We must approach the media and their potential health effects on children as a reality of contemporary life. With this in mind, we need to decide what sort of life we want that to be.

Parents, health professionals, policymakers and the entertainment industry each bear some responsibility. For example, parents should ensure that their children are thoughtful, critical consumers of media. They should set content and time limits on media use, monitor and discuss the media their children consume, and take TVs and video games out of the children’s bedrooms. Health care professionals need to recognize the effects of media on child health and ask about media use as part of their evaluation of health risks. Pediatricians should alert and educate parents when positive media opportunities arise, either educational or informational. Policymakers need to enforce and in some cases, strengthen laws and regulations that protect children as media consumers. They should increase the funding available for media research and

support media education programs in American schools that have been demonstrated to be effective.

Lastly, the entertainment industry needs to acknowledge that it is an important and powerful force in American society, one that affects all of us in many ways. Its products have both positive *and* negative effects on children and their health. Too often scientific research on the effects of media on children and adolescents is ignored or denied by some in the entertainment industry. Yet the leading medical groups in this country, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Psychological Association, American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry---representing more than half a million health professionals---all echo the same conclusion. In July, these organizations issued a joint statement on the impact of entertainment violence on children. The conclusion, based on decades of research, is that viewing entertainment violence can lead to increases in aggressive attitudes, values and behavior, particularly in children. It is time for everyone in the entertainment industry to join us in protecting and promoting the health of our children.

If the entertainment industry accepts our invitation, we can start talking about reasonable and practical solutions, none of which has to do with bans, censorship or restrictions on creative activities. For example, pediatricians in California volunteer their time to work with writers and producers in conveying child health issues accurately and appropriately in television shows and movies. We hope media producers will use the American Academy of Pediatrics' Media Resource Team's offer to serve as a resource for accurate information on pediatric medicine and child and family health and well-being. Many in the entertainment industry are parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles themselves. As individuals they care deeply about children and youth. We are simply asking them to take their personal values into the workplace as they pursue their business of selling movies, games and music. Though many producers and consumers of entertainment media express helplessness to change the flood of violence, this problem will only be solved through caring people—media producers and media consumers--deciding to reject violent media. As the entertainment audience, we must focus on what we want our young people to learn and how we want them to behave. To do so, we must support positive entertainment

products and reject negative and dangerous media products. To extend the philosophy of a wonderful movie, *Field of Dreams*, “If you do not come, they will not build it.”

MEDIA MATTERS

In order for children and adolescents to be protected from the damaging effects of media, they must learn to “read” and understand media messages for what they are, rather than passively accepting them at face value. If they are media literate, young people can consume and enjoy media, embracing positive content and rejecting negative, hurtful, or dangerous material. Media education teaches us to be selective, critical viewers who make informed choices and can evaluate and modulate media’s effect on ourselves and on society.

Media Matters, a national public education campaign launched three years ago by the American Academy of Pediatrics, helps pediatricians, parents and children become more aware of the influence that media have on child and adolescent health. Through lecturing at medical schools, speaking to families, visiting elementary schools, and addressing community groups, AAP members have been raising important issues of concern such as the media’s relationship to violent behavior and aggression, substance abuse, obesity and poor body-image.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, we are all in this together and we should seek a collective solution. Parents, health professionals, the entertainment industry and policymakers have critical roles in discussing and addressing the increasing amount of media violence in society, particularly when it comes to the health of children and adolescents. We are a society with great resources, economic and human. We have been very successful at developing and preserving our economic resources. The American entertainment industry has plenty of creativity, innovation and vision. They can respond to the FTC report findings and stop the marketing of violent to our youth. They can make socially responsible entertainment and they can make money, preserving economic resources. Given the overwhelming body of research indicating the danger posed by media violence to the normal, healthy development of our human resources, we need to focus on nurturing and preserving those resources, our children and our nation’s future.